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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 001376

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ASEC](#) [TH](#) [SNAP](#) [TRT](#)

SUBJECT: THAI POLITICAL UPDATE: DUELING DEMOS

REF: A. BANGKOK 1180

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 0538

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reason 1.4 (b) (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Thaksin's ruling Thai Rak Thai had the bigger demonstration, but the opposition rally on Sunday had more spirit. Thaksin promised more of everything: political reform, transparency and, by the way, a pay raise for civil servants. The opposition scored by turning out a bigger crowd this week than previously, and by marching on the Democracy Monument and on Government House without incident. Police behaved correctly throughout the Sunday protest, however, the concern remains that discipline could break on one side or the other, resulting in a situation that will bring problems to a head. More groups have joined the anti-Thaksin campaign; the latest is a group of "academics and royal relatives" who have petitioned the King to intervene and appoint an short-term interim government to oversee some constitutional changes and new elections.

IN THIS CORNER...

[1](#)2. (C) Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party (TRT) led off the weekend's events with a very large rally on Sanam Luang field on the evening of Friday, March 3. By the time Poloffs arrived at Sanam Luang at 8pm, there was already a large crowd of around 200,000 people gathered to listen to PM Thaksin's speech; some estimates put the crowd at over 300,000. Most of the audience appeared to be from the countryside, with a number of middle-aged men and women. The streets were almost devoid of taxi and tuk-tuk drivers as many attended the rally; most of these drivers are from the countryside themselves, and they make up a big part of Thaksin's urban support base. Although the turnout was quite impressive, the crowd was noticeably unenthused and seemed removed from what was happening on stage, especially when compared to the anti-Thaksin rallies. Some walked around with cardboard posters on wooden sticks, but many were like one 50-something woman who lugged her banner backwards over her shoulders with a cigarette in the other hand as she circled the crowd sluggishly. As large as the crowd was, the people quickly disbanded and left as soon as Thaksin finished his speech and left; the field emptied out within 20 minutes.

[1](#)3. (U) In Thaksin's speech, he defended his actions related to the controversial Shin Corp sale (ref B). He also made a number of promises. First, he pledged that he would not accept the PM position after the election if TRT received less than 50 percent of the total votes cast -- meaning more than the total of their opponents and the "no vote" ballots. He said that the new Parliament would focus on amending the constitution and would call for a second snap election in nine to 15 months, after political reform is completed. He said he would have a media representative sit in on all procurement committees for projects over 100 million baht. He also promised to raise civil servant salaries in 2007. The Democrat Party asked the Electoral Commission to check the speech for violations of campaign law, arguing that his promises of a pay raise to civil servants could be construed as vote-buying.

AND, WEIGHING IN AT 150,000...

[1](#)4. (C) The People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) demonstration on March 5 was a very different affair. The crowd was perhaps half the size of Thaksin's, but it was considerably larger than the previous anti-Thaksin demonstrations had been (ref A). If last week's PAD demonstration was approximately 120,000, we would put this one at about 150,000. The crowd was also far more fired up than we had seen at any previous demonstration. There were more students and younger people; participants of all ages did not just sit and listen, but responded whole-heartedly to the speakers and musicians. In part, this was because the speeches were a small part of the evening. Demonstrators visited the "booths" set up by FTAWatch and various anti-Thaksin groups, each distributing flyers, posters, selling T-shirts, hats and buttons, and displaying a remarkable number of caricatures of Thaksin as Hitler or the devil. The Thammasat University Chinese Opera debuted their latest production, full of satirical references to Thaksin's

troubles. At 9:00, the demonstrators began to form up for the march on the Democracy Monument, less than a kilometer away down a main street. Most of the crowd on the field joined the march, singing and chanting "Thaksin -- get out;" the march was led by hundreds of the eerily-silent "Dharma Army", adherents of a strict Buddhist sect, many of whom marched barefoot (ref A). Unlike previous demonstrations, members of the crowd made a point of approaching Poloff observers to shout their slogans in English. The crowd was disciplined and very well organized -- hundreds of banners and protest placards, tens of thousands of small Thai flags waiving, large yellow and blue flags leading the way. The police behaved correctly throughout, although they appeared more worried than they had at the Feb. 26 demonstration. We noted the absence of female police officers, who had helped screen the demonstrators last week.

15. (C) After some speeches at the Democracy Monument, the word spread that the crowd would march on Government House. Poloff, who arrived at Government House ahead of the demonstrators, spoke to the sound crew who arrived to set up the lights and loudspeakers. According to them, the PAD had considered marching on the PM's house, but had been warned off that move by police during consultations before the demo began. Government House was an acceptable alternative to both sides. Police along the route stopped the demonstrators at several points to delay their arrival at Government House while more police were moved into position, but they did not try to prevent the marchers from proceeding. The Dharma Army had an impromptu kitchen set up on the sidewalk near Government House with hot soup ready for their marchers by the time the crowd turned up; clearly, the police were expecting their visitors. Here again, the crowd was very disciplined, with designated staff linking arms to prevent the crowd surging forward, using megaphones and loudspeakers to keep the march under control. We understand that PAD had supporters along the march route armed with video cameras, to document any provocations (and prove their own innocence). Estimates of the number of demonstrators who arrived at Government House at about 11:30 pm ranged from 20,000 to 50,000. The crowd disbursed from Government House around 2 am, according to press reports; Dharma Army members returned to Sanam Luang to camp out and participate in the next round: the PAD says that the demonstration will continue this evening and every evening until Thaksin resigns. They are expected to march on Government House again tonight, and some will sleep there and stay to protest during the Cabinet meeting on Tuesday.

THE KING -- AGAIN

16. (SBU) Adding to Thaksin's woes, the independent press highlighted the latest group to take a public, anti-Thaksin stand. A group of over 100 "academics and royal relatives" petitioned the King on March 3 to remove Thaksin as PM and appoint a short-term interim government to oversee constitutional changes and new elections. The petition says that Thaksin "lost legitimacy because he unjustly dissolved Parliament and worsened the situation." The signatories include a number of well-known Thaksin critics, among them current and former university rectors, anti-corruption officials, former ambassadors and other members of the "A" list.

COMMENT

17. (C) The threat that the crowd would march out of Sanam Luang on March 5 had inspired many predictions of chaos, violence and provocations. In the end, both police and protestors showed discipline and restraint. The march was impressive, but not enough, by itself, to make Thaksin reconsider his refusal to step down. Although both sides have pledged to maintain this kind of discipline, the concern remains that one side or the other will get too tired and frustrated with the continuing standoff, possibly leading to a provocation or a miscalculation

18. (C) Thaksin's offer of a short-lived Parliament to consider constitutional reform is a clever move. It may take some of the steam out of his less-committed opponents, who might reconcile themselves to the prospect of another year of Thaksin followed by a more serious chance to unseat him in elections. The civil service pay hikes are not a bad idea either. Thaksin's popularity in the countryside is largely based on his populist measures like the village development funds, which make low-interest loans for villagers. It's time for him to bolster his support in the capital with measures to spread the wealth to the urban-dwellers as well. The election -- if it happens -- is less than a month away.

BOYCE